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FM AMEMBASSY CAIRO  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1999  
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE  
RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS CAIRO 006371

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NSC FOR RICK WATERS

E.O. 12958: N/A  
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SUBJECT: CAIRO DATE MARKET AS POLITICAL BAROMETER

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¶1. (SBU) In a recent visit to Cairo's bustling date market, poloff chatted with several date vendors about their merchandise and marketing techniques. Egyptians traditionally break the Ramadan fast with a date - a custom that harkens back to the 7th century, when the Prophet Mohammed broke his fast in a similar manner - so Ramadan is the peak season for date-sellers, as demand soars. Since the early 1990's, Cairo date vendors have adopted the Ramadan marketing gimmick of naming their merchandise after popular figures of the past year - normally, singers and actors, but depending on the events of the year, sometimes political figures. In past years, the juiciest dates have been named after Lebanese pop sensations Haifa Wahby and Nancy Agram, beloved Egyptian actress Layla Elwy, Princess Diana (1997), Saddam Hussein (2002), and Osama bin Ladin, while the dregs of the date barrel have been advertised as Ariel Sharon (a popular worst-date name for decades, according to our sample of vendors) and President George W. Bush (a worst-date standby since 2002).

¶2. (SBU) This year, a new name displaced Lebanese pop stars as the most succulent and appealing date - Hassan Nasrallah of Hizbullah (termed by various Embassy contacts and one controversial local opinion poll as, "the most popular man in Egypt," following this summer's Lebanon crisis). According to several date vendors, the prized "Nasrallah" date sells for roughly \$2 a pound, and "is selling very quickly this Ramadan - it is difficult to keep them in stock" (this holds true for both the Cairo date market, and its counterpart in Alexandria, where econoff spotted bags of highly-priced Nasrallahs for sale). Several vendors commented to poloff that they were "proud" to sell something with Nasrallah's name - "he is a real Arab hero!"

¶3. (SBU) Many date merchants have termed the second most expensive date of 2006 the "Gamal Mubarak"; as one explained to poloff, "it is clear that he is going to take his daddy's chair soon, so the date market must reflect this political reality!" According to vendors, this is the first year a "Gamal Mubarak" date has been sold, and one shopkeeper commented to poloff in hushed tones, "we obviously had to sell a date with that name at the top of the list, not as a dried up date, although the bottom of the list might be where we really think he belongs!" The worst dates of 2006 (selling at roughly 11 cents per pound) are the "Olmert" (after the Israeli PM), "Sharon", "Bush", and the "Rice" (a new addition to the least succulent dates of Ramadan name-list). Date merchants told poloff that they relish the Ramadan date-naming tradition as an opportunity to express opinions, and simultaneously amuse the buying public so as to increase sales.

JONES